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Spy vs. spy: Hardly a job for James Bond

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WASHINGTON — First remember this, cautioned a congressional staff aide who encounters Soviet spies frequently: "Most intelligence work is dog work. The great body of them are not master spies. They're grubby people grubbily mucking about for data."

With three major U.S. spy trials brewing, espionage may seem a dashing enterprise. But actually, Soviet spies appear to spend far more time sitting through long public hearings than they spend shaking FBI tails on dark country roads and plucking microfilm out of hollow tree trunks.

It's not much better for FBI counterspies, who see themselves as outnumbered and always playing catch-up. They are so used to long stakeouts that they routinely buy Slurpees, the large size, to use as porta-johns in a pinch.

So it goes in Washington's endless game of spy vs. spy, pitting about 200 Soviet and Eastern bloc spies in the nation's capital, according to FBI and Senate Intelligence Committee reports, against about 100 FBI counterintelligence agents working in and around the city.

From the FBI's perspective, the point is "to make it expensive, difficult and risky for their service to operate in our country," a former top bureau counterspy explained. "You know you can't stop it; you just try to make it hard and time-consuming."

From the Soviet perspective, the main point appears to be to shake out the useful information in an open society that produces interesting, unclassified reports, scientific papers, statistical analyses, and projections by the ton. Two agencies split the job: the KGB, the Soviet state security agency, and the GRU, which specializes in military intelligence.

New York, Washington and San Francisco are the hubs of the enterprise, in which an FBI-estimated total of 700 to 800 identified Soviet agents battle 300 to 400 FBI counterspies. Overall, almost 2,600 Soviet officials work in the United States, and an additional 800 Soviet nationals are employed by the United Nations Secretariat.

Public information

More than 80 percent of the information they pick up is thought to be unclassified material. The figure is based on published Central Intelligence Agency estimates that 80 percent of the material the United States gleans on the Soviet Union comes from public sources.

The Senate Armed Services Committee, for example, publishes thousands of pages of unclassified hearing transcripts annually, and Richard Caswell, the committee's documents clerk, says that, aside from defense industry lobbyists, "our heaviest traffic is with the Soviet Embassy."

"I resent like hell giving it out," Caswell continued, "but all we can do is turn them down if they come back for a second free copy."

Classified material is harder to obtain, but so much is classified that a secret document isn't necessarily a significant one. The Armed Forces Courier Service, an agency charged with transporting classified material for the Defense and State Departments and their contractors, carried 30,000 tons of secret documents in 1984, according to congressional testimony.

It might help, of course, for a spy to befriend an American with a security clearance. But the problem is the same: About 4.3 million Americans have access to classified documents, according to Defense Department statistics provided to Congress in April. Of these, more than 600,000 are cleared for top secret information, and more than 100,000 are qualified to review what's called "sensitive compartmentalized information."

Wiretaps common

For both sides, wiretapping is the standard means of focusing on the targets. In 1980, federal judges acting under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act approved 319 telephone taps, hidden microphones, radio intercepts and hidden TV cameras aimed at catching spies nationwide. In 1981 they approved 431; in 1982, 475, and in 1983, the latest year reported to Congress, 549.

Telephone numbers called by the targets of wiretaps can be identified and recorded without human monitoring, a retired senior FBI official notes. It is also possible, he and others say, to record masses of telephone calls made by a wiretap subject and sort out by computer [illegible] in which selected key words or phrases were used.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union has built a new embassy and residential compound atop a 351-foot hill with a clear line of sight to the White House, the Pentagon and important long-distance telephone towers. This vantage point, discussed with much wincing by U.S. counterspies, places Soviet electronic eavesdroppers astride microwave beams that carry phone calls and data linking the Central Intelligence Agency with Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and Europe, and the Pentagon with virtually all U.S. military installations worldwide.

Satellite data

Moreover, according to congressional testimony by David L. Watters, an electronic security and surveillance specialist, the new Soviet site will permit eavesdropping on "much of NASA's missile and satellite tracking data and information" and on microwave circuits from the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Md., the nation's biggest intelligence operation.

The Soviet electronic vantage point can be countered, as long as U.S. military and intelligence personnel practice what is called "good telephone discipline" and air no secrets on nonsecure lines, according to intelligence specialists. The FBI also has urged the Reagan administration to buy underground lines that are harder to tap than microwave circuits.

In March, the National Security Agency let a $44 million contract to three communications companies — RCA, AT&T and Motorola — to jointly develop an improved scrambler telephone costing $2,000 per unit. The scrambler garbles messages to avoid interception.

Last year, the NSA — whose specialty is worldwide electronic intelligence-gathering — won congressional approval of plans to construct an "electromagnetic envelope" around its main building. The intention is to prevent leakage of electronic signals by installing new electromagnetic shields and thermal insulation, reflective glass and a new roof, and walling-up unnecessary windows.

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Favorite target

Capitol Hill, with more than 18,000 staffers, reams of government documents and thousands of ill-kept secrets, remains Washington's top Soviet spy target, according to 1982 congressional testimony by Theodore M. Gardner, then the FBI's special agent in charge of the Washington field office.

At the Library of Congress, Soviet agents are known to have roamed classified stacks posing as librarians. Very frequently, Soviets attend the public hearings of committees on defense, foreign affairs, agriculture, and commerce.

Typically, Soviet agents also strike up acquaintances with committee staff members. These are purposeful acquaintances, FBI agents are convinced, while acknowledging that, as one put it, "for every one American recruited, thousands have been cultivated and found wanting."

Some congressional personnel are not so sure they're being exploited. For example, John Collins, the Library of Congress' senior defense specialist, noted in an interview that he had been visited by dozens of Soviet personnel, including some later identified as spies. "But I got at least as much out of these guys as they got out of me," Collins said.

"I only discussed what I'd already published," he continued, "but they let me know some positive information about what bothers them about Star Wars and chemical warfare and the MX missile." Perhaps they were using him "as a conduit for their points of view," Collins said, "but what's wrong with that?"

In the past, Robert F. Kennedy, attorney general in the Kennedy administration, and Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's national security adviser, had long-term social relationships with known Soviet agents whom they sometimes used as conduits, according to biographers of both men.

American leftists in Washington also say they see Soviet personnel frequently, because, as one put it, "they think we see things in the correct perspective." Two, Larry Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, and Carl Oglesby, former head of Students for a Democratic Society, said they had declined offers from Soviet officials to write anonymously for Soviet publications. Oglesby also said he turned down a free trip to the Moscow Olympics.